

oh lovely, lovely chicken house.
Oh farm.
This is our place.
We came with it.

CUT HER HAIR

"Cut her hair. It takes
the strength from her. She's
too skinny," they said to Mother.
It's true, I was light
as a fish bone on the beach
that summer;
a dried smelt of a girl at six,
I blew this way and that way
in the winds of my own laughter,
shrieking and running at the beauty parlor
while Mother had her hair done.
Elsewhere, the war went on
I knew, but what was war?
Hitler, that bad man; the absent boys next door
who sent home nazi flags or coconuts,
depending where they were.
But I ran careless in the beauty shop
which smelled of perfume and ammonia; I ran
up and down between the dryers
where ladies sat
having their curls set.

"How about a finger wave?"
Alvina said to Mother, and I pictured
fingers gaily waving, as to men
in Pathe newsreels marching ten by ten.
In the beauty shop, where ladies came
to shop for beauty, nails
glittered like carapace of insects,
and curled at the ends of fingers
like the hooves of horses I'd seen
crippled by neglect.
Never neglected, I knew I was lucky.
"Oh, eat your Cream of Wheat!"
Mother cried, like other mothers of that time,
"Just think, of children starving overseas.
Oh, eat." I cared
about those children;
but I was thin by naughty preference
and chose to run or read instead of eating,
and my hair grew.
My long hair. Commonly
french-braided, then turned
up in loops like handles on a purse

and tied with grosgrain ribbon
or the rainbow-streaked georgette.
When loose, I could sit on it.
They said, "She can sit on her hair,"
as if it were an acrobatic feat.
"But look at her, thin like that.
It's a sin to let her strength all run
to hair. Cut it off," the beautician chided.
So Mother cut my hair, or had it done,
my long black shining hair. Then
I could sit on it all right, step on it
in fact, where it lay on the floor
like a herd of snakes.
"I want my hair back," I cried.
"Oh, you'll look cute," the operator sniffed,
and took another whack, then it was done.

Contrary to expectation,
none of this put any meat on me,
nor was I cute.
For I had lost my mane, my tossing
mantle, my purse handles.

Now, in middle age, at last
after years of cutting hair,
the cure must finally
have been efficacious.
No longer thin
as a sheep bone in the grass, a wheat straw,
a glass stirring rod, a thread
pulled from a hem, long and thin but strong,
I am soft, soft, substantial.
I do have strength,
more than expected.
Who knows? As I get older,
maybe I'll grow my hair
and sit on it.

* * *

CODA:

Here's to crackpot theories,
opinionations pressed on helpless children,
may these good intentions stick
where they belong,
in the teeth
like seeds from wild blackberries.

— Barbara Drake

Yamhill OR